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Winter of discontent

The Munich Security Conference witnessed a new level of nervousness as Europeans contemplate a weakened transatlantic relationship under Trump

There is a well-known warning to all politicians seeking to sound convincing to their audiences: if you have to explain too much, you are losing them. If there are too many ambiguities in a message, you trip yourself up justifying them. The platform of the Munich Security Conference is a tough testing ground for all politicians given the enormous concentration on what is discussed there. This year's meeting was no exception.

The non-stop parade of speakers offered a continuous opportunity to take stock of the self-presentations of national governments, international institutions, and non-government organizations, while seeing them all challenged by their counterparts, by experts, journalists, and various other thought leaders. Born over fifty years ago to examine the state of transatlantic relations, the MSC today is global in both its agenda and participants, reflecting the state of an increasingly interwoven world.

Not surprisingly, there is a high level of interest among the ever-growing number of MSC participants whenever a new American president is elected. Anticipation of the new administration in Washington is highlighted by the fact that its first self-presentation outside of the U.S. is usually in Munich. This time the new vice president, Mike Pence, appeared together with two members of the new Cabinet, both of whom are responsible for security policies, domestic (Department of Homeland Security) and foreign (Department of Defense).

Erratic nature of the Trump administration

Yet there was a particularly high level of anxiety in Munich with the new Trump administration, whose surprise victory last November still rippling through the audience. There has been an unprecedented degree

of policy inconsistency, conflicting messages about directions, and shocking statements from the president, contradicting decades of American foreign policy positions on numerous issues. People attending the conference wanted some clarity on what they could expect from Trump's team.

Vice President Pence was there to reassure America's increasingly nervous European partners that there was indeed continuity and consistency. His message was what most of the audience wanted to hear: that the president remains committed to the Nato alliance and that the importance of transatlantic relations is of paramount importance.

But not everyone was convinced.

While it is too soon for the Trump administration to have assembled itself after one month in office, there are all too many contradictions in what has been said by the president. There is confusion about policy directions relating to Russia with regard to sanctions, policy on Ukraine, or collaboration in fighting ISIS. There is a policy disconnect on Israeli-Palestinian relations, which makes interpreting the Trump administration's views on Israeli settlements a challenge.

Contradictions dealing with relations with Iran, the Syrian civil war, questions regarding relations with China—all seem to add to the unpredictability of the Trump team, which makes allies nervous. While Secretary of Defence Jim Mattis underscored the importance of a Nato alliance, Trump earlier has called it "obsolete" in addition to questioning U.S. commitments to members who don't meet the demand for more defence spending. The new Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, who is at the centre of foreign policy now, did not even attend the conference. And then there is the confusion about the role of the National Security Council, which has been buffeted by the forced departure of its director Michael Flynn amid allegations of connections with Russian officials before Trump's inauguration.

All of this suggests the lack of a credible decision-making process in the White House with a president making policy without adequate input from a coordinated foreign policy team.

This was the background of the Munich Security Conference attendees trying to explain and understand what to expect from Washington in the next four years.

A rising wave of populism

Meanwhile, European responses have been a mixed bag of admonitions about the need for a stronger European commitment to its own defence posture in expectation of a U.S. more concerned with itself, or equally worse, reverting to a default relationship with individual European countries, bypassing the EU framework. The current atmosphere of centrifugal forces pulling at the fabric of the EU is fodder for those in Washington sceptical of a coherent EU policy. And many European leaders fear the same wave of populism represented by Trump impacting their domestic environments this year. They have good reason to feel that way.

The struggle in Munich was captured in the theme of the conference itself, one that asked where we can gain clarity about a way forward that seems to herald a tectonic shift in the post-Cold War framework of policy thinking and making on both sides of the Atlantic.

And there were countries represented at the conference who looked quite favourably at that shift into an uncertain future from which they seek to profit, be it Russia, Iran, or China. Indeed, the foreign ministers of Russia and Iran both called for a new order without referencing their own self-serving interests and actions, which do not represent more global security or stability. And there are others who were not in Munich but were listening, for example, in North Korea.

The transatlantic bargain which has held the U.S. and Europe so strongly together has been the basis of the MSC and the core assumption of the alliance for half a century. That has not only been marked by military benchmarks, but also has been made of shared assumptions about certain sacrosanct values and institutions held up as the foundation of the transatlantic community. It was always affirmed in the past as we debated over tactics but rarely questioned the alliance itself. Today we find that foundation in need of reassurance. But when a policy of that importance finds itself having to be explained and justified at its core, these are signals that it is facing a serious challenge to its legitimacy. That is a wakeup call. And whoever answers that call must be prepared to give a convincing reply. Senator John McCain offered a clear one as did Chancellor Angela Merkel and several other speakers. But still a large shadow in the room was cast by someone who wasn't even there.

Between now and the next MSC in 2018, the usual reassurances about the transatlantic alliance won't work. There needs to be a renewal of its mission, its methods, and the motivation underlying its purpose—and not only among those gathered at the conference each year, but among

the citizens in every country of that alliance who need to get a clear, convincing message about why they should support it. Anything less than that won't be enough.



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